

EYES ONLY FOR THE DEPUTY AMBASSADOR

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

January 13, 1967

PARTICIPANTS : Brigadier General De Puy, US 1st Division

SUBJECT :

1. De Puy's views, as expressed below from a conversation at his headquarters in Lai Khe, are of interest not only in reflecting De Puy's field experience in the 1st Division's TAOR but in suggesting the opinions he is likely to be expressing in Washington, after February, in his new job as SACSA (Special Assistant to the Chairman of the JCS for Special Activities), i. e. chief advisor to the JCS on counter-insurgency and special operations.

2. Tactics for a Win

"The solution in Viet Nam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm.... till the other side cracks and gives up".

"We're making life unpleasant for the VC....at least, I think we are. Finally, they'll say: 'Ho, we're smarter than they are,' (side comment by De Puy: "I don't have much faith in our brainpower, only in our firepower") "Our cause is more just....but enough is enough. Let's lie low for a few years and get the US to go home."

A "We're winning the war., ^{De Puy continued.} We're killing VC, guerrillas, Main Forces, destroying their bases, destroying caches of food and weapons, we're getting more Chieu Hoi. If people in Washington want to win fast-- if they're in a hurry, because of elections or something--they could move five more divisions over here and get the job done faster. But if they're not in such a hurry, we can do the job with what we've got, i. e., including the 9th Division."

"Pacification hasn't worked anywhere. But the 1st Division is doing one thing: ~~killing~~ guerrillas. We have long-range programs now to destroy the Phu Loi Battalion. In general, to get the VC provincial battalions:

keep probing, searching, harassing the areas where they take their leave, training and rest, their bases. Keep bombing their base areas; we need a sensor that would signal to us when someone had entered that area, so we could bomb it."

- A "You need fast reaction to contact: with an air strike. Even against a squad, or snipers, I'd use an air strike; artillery is not good when they have overhead cover." "It's true that in the Delta, you have more population in the area than we usually in our TAOR; even so, I'd
- B use an air strike, but first I'd send over planes with loudspeakers and leaflets telling the people to get out in the middle of the open fields within five minutes (where I'd pick all of them up, for interrogation), then hit the place. If the VC wouldn't let them leave....that wouldn't make the VC too popular."

"As I said: what you need is more bombs, more shells, more napalm...."

Comment

Recently two correspondents who have seen an extraordinary amount of combat action in Viet Nam brought up De Puy's name several times in the course of a day walking through a sweep operation in the Delta with a battalion from another US Division. When various reports came in of groups of VC in thickets or hamlets in the area, they commented: "De Puy would have blanketed this place with artillery and bombs, Delta or not." As contacts developed in the course of the day, they said, "De Puy would be flying over here himself right now: about 50 feet above the ground." (The battalion commander in question was unable to get this chopper pilot to go below 1500 feet, an altitude at which I found I could make out almost nothing worth seeing--the only people I could spot easily were those wearing white--the few hours I accompanied him.) When artillery, called in against a squad of snipers, was slow in arriving, they said: "De Puy would have sacked the artillery commander on the spot."

C These comments all came back to me in this conversation. De Puy showed clearly his belief in massive firepower as the answer to the problems of this war; even in discussing tactics against small sniper bands in populated areas, he never referred to aggressive small unit ground action. A high U.S. official who passed a day recently with De Puy in his command chopper reported that they spent two hours

C raking a small grove which several VC had been seen to enter their .50 caliber MG's, returning several times for more ammo, although there was a battalion from the 1st Division in the immediate vicinity with one platoon only a few hundred yards away, never ordered in by De Puy. This official contrasted De Puy's cautions (almost "ARVN-like") about risking US casualties in ground action--relying almost entirely upon heavy firepower rather than close combat--with De Puy's personal aggressiveness and courage. (He does sack commanders on the spot; and he monitors the radio set in his chopper and heads immediately toward contact: a new way of commanding a division in combat. De Puy invited me to spend a day with him in his chopper, confirming that he likes to fly at 50 feet or under--"you can't see anything at 1500"--and commenting that he estimates his chopper has been hit "40 or 50 times".)

If such an approach is applied in the Delta, it will be hard to avoid large civilian casualties; and there is a real question as to its effectiveness against small guerrilla units, sniping from poorly-identified locations and well supplied throughout the area with bunkers with overhead cover. Such tactics, though killing a certain number of VC, could fall well short of decisive impact on guerillas and could contribute in the longer run to an overall growth in the size of VC forces through recruiting. I am not aware of clear evidence that VC forces have decreased in overall size or in dedication even in De Puy's current TAOR, despite De Puy's assertion, based upon casualty figures and an undoubted decline in VC comfort, that "we are winning." De Puy appears to believe that the same tactics that have successfully blocked VC large-unit actions are equally appropriate and effective against guerrillas in populated areas, and that our winning streak in the first type of operation can be smoothly extrapolated to a slow but sure win in the counter-guerrilla war that lies ahead. Both beliefs are questionable.

3. "Everyone is pointing the finger now at ARVN: how bad ARVN is. These things run in fads, and this year the fad is to blame everything on ARVN. Next MACV will react, and point at the National Police; they're just as bad as ARVN. So are the RD Cadre: They're good for weeks, then they fall apart. No US agency has had any success in influencing their counterparts; but they take turns pointing at each other. I'm sick of it."

"What beat ARVN was infiltration. In May and June of 1965, ARVN was being beaten, by superior forces. In those days, MACV relied entirely on GVN intelligence, and we were always six months behind on infiltration figures."

"The ARVN problem is leadership, from top to bottom. ARVN simply doesn't promote on the basis of competence. But changing division commanders won't do much; they don't have battalion commanders, or company commanders, or platoon leaders. And you can't get the division commanders changed anyway, thanks to politics and corruption." (On the prospects of getting rid of Brigadier General Thuan, 5th Division Commander: "What I want to know is, how much is he paying off to Khang?")

"The solution has got to be: Do the job primarily with US troops, and just get whatever you can out of RVNAF. That won't be any more than you are already getting. And that is damn little. But they could do even less; what worries me now is, I'm afraid this new role of supporting RD will just be a license to ARVN to do nothing at all, sit down and stop operating at all."

The only way to improve ARVN would come from an integrated command, with many US officers in command positions at all levels."

Comment

There are some contradictory elements in De Puy's comments on ARVN, all of which, however, consistently support the argument: "The US military advisory effort has not 'failed' and should not be criticised: it has been as effective as it could reasonably be hoped to be." Thus:

(a) ARVN is not incompetent--^{hence} since no issue arises of advisor effectiveness--it was simply overwhelmed by superior numbers.

(b) ARVN is incompetent, but so are all other GVN agencies; MACV hasn't failed any worse than other advisory effort.

(c) ARVN's incompetence is due to leadership weaknesses that MACV couldn't possibly change.

The last proposition has some momentous corollaries. One is that RVNAF cannot be expected to improve in the future, whatever the advisory effort. Second, it follows--given ARVN's current inadequate performance--that progress in expanding security must come from an enlarged role for US forces. These are not conclusions to accept lightly; and in fact, many authorities would challenge them. The first can be broken down into two parts:

(a) That the leadership problem--agreed by all to be crucial--is equally severe at all levels and a solution would require wholesale replacement of the whole officer corps; and

(b) That ~~it~~ is close to impossible for the US to bring about any changes, especially at the higher levels.

I do not believe either of these notions is valid.

The first point is contested by most of those I have talked to who have had, unlike De Puy, direct experience in working with a variety of Vietnamese field commanders: e.g., the Senior Advisor to III Corps (Lt. General Seaman, II Field Force Victory Commander), the Deputy Senior Advisor to III Corps (Col. Mueller), John Vann (Senior Civil Representative, III Corps, formerly Senior Advisor to 7th Division), and Col. Hunnicutt (recently Senior Advisor, 25th Division), along with several other division senior advisors and many sector advisors. They all feel, first, that replacement of key commanders who are incompetent and corrupt by available, adequate officers would, in many cases, have a very marked effect on unit performance and effectiveness: the kind of effect the VC in the area would feel acutely and immediately, unlike most of the "improvement" that MACV has announced in the past, supposedly occurring despite retention of weak, incompetent, unmotivated commanders.

They do not agree that wholesale, infeasible shifts of commanders at all levels are essential to significant improvement, nor that good division or regimental commanders would be hopelessly stymied by the irremediable incompetence of the bulk of their subordinate officers. It is true that there is widespread weakness at the company and even more at the platoon level; but given actual understrength manning of most RVNAF units, companies can generally be run more like

platoons, and even battalions like companies, in comparison to US models. And there is enough good leadership talent in the RVNAF officer corps to fill these critical battalion, regiment, and division command jobs adequately.

In every case when I have asked the advisor to a weak commander whether he personally could identify potential commanders he thought would do a very much better job, he has been able to name several, without any hesitation, generally within the same command: an exec, a G-3 or other key staffer, a subordinate unit commander, a district or province chief. Going further afield, even better candidates are available, not now in command or critical jobs: Saigon or Corps staffers, or officers involuntarily retired.

To give a concrete example: All of the US officials mentioned above believe that changes in two commanders (not 200 or 20: though some other changes would follow) could lead to quick and striking improvement in ARVN performance and the security environment in Long An Province: Brig. General Chinh, commander of the 25th ARVN Division and his protege, Lt. Colonel Hai, commander of the 46 Regiment. They believe that replacements who would have such effect could be found within these same commands: e. g. Lt. Colonel Nhon (now commanding the 49th Regiment) to replace Chinh (though still better, such officers not now in the command as Col. An, now charge of Chieu Hoi, or General Pham Van Dong, retired), and Major Dong (now commanding the 1st Battalion of the 46th) to replace Hai.

This theory has not yet been put to the test.

If it is true that a reallocation of jobs within the RVNAF officer corps, could lead to major, relatively quick improvement in operational effectiveness (as many US and Vietnamese authorities believe and I have been led to believe) the next question is whether such a reallocation is practically feasible. And can the US play any significant role in bringing it about?

If one assumed that US efforts to change incompetent, unmotivated commanders have been as well-focused, as adroit and as forceful in the past five years as we can reasonably expect them to be in the future, there would be very little basis for hope in this area. This is about what De Puy and many others--including some high officials in Washington--appear to believe, and they are accordingly pessimistic

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7

about the possibility of improving RVNAF. This is a hard matter to judge, without knowing precisely what efforts have been made to change RVNAF commanders, and why they succeeded or failed (if is evident that if there were many such attempts, most of them must have failed); very few people would be in a position to know this. However, many high-ranking officials, civil and military, question strongly whether the US Mission has focused its influence as effectively as it could in a comprehensive, determined effort to replace incompetent high-level commanders and officials, or to increase the role of competence in the whole Vietnamese system of personnel assignment. Obviously, the highest levels of the Mission have been aware of the shortcomings of high-level Vietnamese commanders and officials for a long time. It does not follow that they have done all that they might to act forcefully on this knowledge, given the obvious sensitivity of intervening in personnel matters and the need to conserve US influence for gaining a variety of interests. A reexamination of the "rules of the game" concerning targets and forms of US influence may be in order, in the light of current goals and conditions: ^{General} ~~and~~ the alternative necessity of bringing still larger numbers of Americans over to do jobs that we despair of getting RVNAF to do.

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